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Child Devouring Demons: Childhood Vulnerability and the Relations of Humans to the Demonic

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In this brief paper, I have a limited, primarily ethnographic, objective.¹ I want to outline a relationship between children and conceptions of evil. In the preliminary analysis that I present here the relations between parents and children and, in particular, between mothers and children can be demonstrated to be analogous in some aspects to relations between humans and divinities, on the one hand, and humans and harmful agents (or at least some harmful agents), on the other. I want to stress that my purpose at this point is to delineate a relationship not to offer a causal explanation. Specifically, I do not want to suggest that parent-child relationships motivate and prestructure cultural conceptions. On the contrary, the relationship between these two domains is complex and mutually transforming. Moreover, the relationships that I am suggesting here can not be considered in isolation. Their meaning is supplemented and modified by a series of other significant relations, social, psychobiological, and cultural. Thus, this is but one piece of a more complex puzzle.²

Children in western Tamang villages are, like children in most villages in Nepal, the most vulnerable to debilitating afflictions.³ First, I want to consider how this vulnerability is culturally constructed and second to suggest that this vulnerability represents the vulnerability of humans in general. To be subject to attack by harmful agents is like being a helpless child. Moreover, to experience an attack by demons or ghosts - to become sick in our terms - is to be consumed by them. Humans are perpetually opposed to and at the mercy of cannibalistic forces. To make the connections outlined here I am going to conclude my remarks today with a discussion of the myth of a child devouring demon and link this account up with general constructions of evil in Tamang culture. Before turning to this myth, however, I want to discuss briefly the basic cultural parameters of childhood among western Tamang.

Life-forces, Shadow-souls, and Children

In western Tamang villages like the one where I lived (about one day Northwest of the Kathmandu valley), kinship and society converge within the boundaries of the village. The transition from childhood to adulthood is, in the first instance, a movement from the relative absence of social definition to social fixity. This transition is accomplished when membership in a circle of kin - structured by the reciprocal relations between exogamous clans - is recognized. Until roughly the age of twelve (in Tamang reckoning one *hekhor* or twelve-year-cycle) a child does not have a fully developed social identity.

¹ This paper was first presented November 4, 1989 for a panel on "Culture and Context in Tamang Childbearing, Childcare and Child Wellbeing" at the 18th Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin. .

²For a more complete discussion of the logic of evil in Tamang culture see Holmberg (1989).

³For more complete overviews of Tamang demographics see Fricke (1986) and Panter-Brick (1989) where issues of childbearing and mortality are considered in detail.

Among Tamang as most Tibeto-Burman speaking groups, mortuary rituals are the primary domain for the representation of social identity. Until about age twelve, the deaths of children do not require any formal mortuary rites and the primary rites of social representation, *gral*, which declare the social embeddedness of the individual in a highly structured circle of kin, are never performed.⁴ Children are in Tamang idiom simply "thrown-out." Their bodies are usually buried under rocks in crevices or overhangs at the peripheries of the village. An interesting correlate of these practices is that the primary mode of swearing at children consists of references to these mortuary practices. When parents are angry at children, they yell, "May the wife-takers carry you in their arms!" "May an overhang be filled with your corpse!" "May the jackals stuff your thigh-bone (as a trumpet) in their belts!" "May the black vultures pluck your eyes out!" "May the flies apply blessing to you!" It is around the age of twelve that a child is seen as fully linked to kinsfolk in a complex web of obligations and rights and it is then that full scale mortuary rituals are performed.

As the social body develops, so does the physical body. Humans have two kinds of souls. One of these is called *so* which is a type of life-force. The life-forces or *so* of children under twelve and adults are different. Among adults, *so* rise up through the body like trees. Every adult, moreover, has an external reflection of their internal *so*. This external reflection is a tree which grows on a hill that only shamans (*bombo*) can reveal during ritual soundings. The condition of these life-force trees and humans are direct reflections of each other. Thus, if the branches of this *so* tree are broken or the trunk is rotten, the internal life-force associated with the person is weakened. When one has a weakened life-force, one is susceptible to all kinds of afflictions. During soundings, bombos or shamans erect fresh saplings in front of houses thereby effecting a symbolic resuscitation of the life-force. The *so* does not come to be established in a tree reflection until someone reaches the age of twelve. After each succeeding twelve-year-cycle, individuals get a renewed *so*.

Where the external *so* of adults is lodged in a particular tree, the *so* of children are less fixed. The *so* of children reside in flowers and are susceptible to wandering. Children thus do not have life-force trees (*so dungma*) but life-force flowers or *so mhendo*. One shaman explained as follows:

Children have a flower. Their *so* is [in] a flower. After they are older, it goes to a dungma or tree. If a child is sick the flower is ruined. The flower is dead or wilted. You must discover which flower it is staying in.

Where the *so* of adults stay in one place the *so* of children are flighty. As the same bombo explained:

They (*so*) stay in one flower but if they go wandering that is the time that they become ill [or die if caught in a tobacco flower or a particular kind of red-flower that grows in low-lying areas]. If they stay in one flower they will not become ill. If they wander a lot they will be sickly, always sick with one disease or another.

When the life-force of a child is associated with a wilted flower or is bouncing from place to place and thus sickly, bombos (shamans) must place the *so* in the care of beings known as *kale ama* or *phamo*, mother-like beings who protect, fabricate, and nurture the child. The ritual placement of children in the care of these beings is usually done for very young children or if a mother is particularly anxious about the welfare of an unborn child. These divine mothers are invoked as meat making, blood making, and bone making and are said to be like a type of mud wasp [Nepali: *kamal kuti*] who are known for their diligent, neat, and auspicious constructions. They are released from the care of these "mothers" when they become older, usually at the time of formal rites of passage, for boys tonsure (*chhewar*) at the age of 3, 5, or 9 and for girls when they ritually receive a first *shyama* or skirt (*shyama pimpa*). *so*, in general, represent the life and vigor of the human body. When *so* expire the body dies and vice versa.

⁴That is to say that memorial death feasts are not required. Some Tamang lamas perform small scale rites upon the death of children but the elaborate feasts which are required for the death of adults are not performed.

Tamang also have shadow-souls or *bla* which unlike *so* continue after the body dies and are the entities which become reborn in new life-forms after death.

Humans have nine of these *bla* or shadow-souls. Although normally resident in the body, these shadow-souls can wander away from the body and become lost or captured by evils of various sorts. If one loses a shadow-soul one becomes ill. In the same way that the instability of the life-forces of children makes them vulnerable to illness, their *bla* are more frequently subject to loss. One of the primary ways that shadow-souls are lost is in instances of fright to which children are more prone. When frightened *bla* are ejected from the body. Thus when children are walking along precipitous trails and become startled in a slip or fall, their parents immediately call out "*bla kho*" or "come shadow-soul." If children are frightened by unusual noises or the rustling of bushes - often interpreted as the activity of harmful spirits - they can lose their shadow-souls. If children awake from frightening dreams or suddenly at night, their shadow-souls, which during sleep wander experiencing dream images, become lost. Loss of one's shadow-soul, as having a diminished life-force, is a precondition for illnesses and afflictions of all kinds.

In summary then children are relatively less defined socially, have unsettled life-force, and are prone to shadow-soul loss. All three of these conditions are conditions of weakness in Tamang thought. Weakness and vulnerability make one subject to the cannibalistic tendencies of all harmful and demonic agents.

Eating and Illness

A primary, if you will encompassing, way that western Tamang conceive of and make illness meaningful is in the symbology of eating.⁵ Proper relations among humans are simultaneously constituted and represented through food and the exchange of food. The Tamang ethos of balanced reciprocity - in classic Maussian terms - is directly evident in the exchange of food: One is required to offer food to guests in both informal and formal contexts, one is required to receive what is offered, and eventually to return hospitality in kind (Mauss 1967; see March 1987). All contexts where Tamang converge are marked by the exchange of food and drink according to a complex pattern of rights and obligations which directly reflect kinship positions. Relations of humans with super or extrahuman beings are also governed by this logic. Sacrificers cajole divinities into a protective demeanor through gifts of food. They sate harmful and demonic agents with appropriate offerings for their consumption. Humans appease harmful agents because - unlike divinities whom they coax from an enigmatic distance - harmful agents intrude in everyday life, grasping people and making them ill.

To be ill - as is the case throughout much of Nepal and South Asia - is to be literally consumed or "fed upon" (see Stone 1988). Harmful and demonic agents are those who are left out of regularized exchanges of food and drink and thus the social whole that represents its relations through measured exchange. Most types of harmful agents are like shades or ghosts. Shades are those who die inauspicious, accidental, or premature deaths. In their inappropriate and anomalous separation from human society they are left out of the commensal exchanges which mark Tamang sociality. In their ravenous state they feed on humans which causes humans to be sick with both minor and major ailments. As they eat at human bodies, they directly cause pain in the parts they eat. A man whose back was broken in a land slide, for instance, haunts living humans with back aches. He eats at the flesh and bones of victims in order to be fed. A cure to these sorts of ailments includes at a minimum a sacrifice whereby a substitute victim is provided to the afflicting agent. In Tamang terms these shades are "unwanted guests" who contort and abuse relations with humans. Tamang villagers are regularly assaulted by a horde of local shades and regional evil spirits who cause specific ailments with specific symptoms and specific sacrificial cures.

This logic of illness receives its purest and most abstracted symbolic development in reference to rarified demons, demons whose presence is perpetual but to whom specific ailments are never attributed.

⁵Here the Tamang appear curiously similar to nearby Chhetri-Bahun populations. See Stone (1988) for an excellent analysis of food and illness in Indo-Nepalese culture.

Evil in this pure form as embodied in a being called *mhamho* condenses ideas of vulnerability, illness, and children in a parsimonious way.

A Child-Devouring Demon

Among the most abstract and generalized of evils in western Tamang communities to the northwest of Trisuli Bazaar is a being known as *mhamho*.⁶ Most specialists list nine named *mhamho* but the myth below refers specifically to *achi mhamho*. Formal versions of the myth are recited at the time of her exorcism in soundings (shamanic rituals) conducted by bombos. The essential elements are as in the following version told to me by a village expert:

mhamho originated within *Nhangkai* [most versions say India] and flew about in mid-space. Wherever *mhamho* wandered, she found nothing to eat. When she went to the mountains to stay, there was nothing to eat. Then she went to Kyirong to stay and found nothing to eat. Then she went to the nine cross roads of *Jongga* where her mind was confused and restless. It was not alright there. Then she went to stay at the nine cross roads in the secret place of *Same Kimar Dadar*. "Where to go? Where to go? There is no place to stay. Where to go?"

Our human children used to go by the trail over there and they were eaten chomp, chomp like radishes. At that time *Guru Pema* [Guru Rimpoche] went over there. While looking over there, the Sangkye [Buddha] knew in his heart-mind that he would have to repress this [*mhamho*]. After leaving her many children behind, [*mhamho*] went off. At that moment, the Sangkye took all those children and snatched them up and put them quickly in the pocket of his coat. After hiding them away he sat. He did not kill them.

When *mhamho* returned and could not see her children she cried. "Where did my sons and daughters go? What has become of them? Where can I go to see them?"

While she was crying and walking along, the Sangkye said, "Why are you walking along crying like that?"

"Where are my children? What did you do with them?" She replied.

The Sangkye answered, "You are crying that much? Is your heart pained too? Why did you eat human children like radishes? Did you think that your own and other peoples children are not of one meat, one blood? While you were eating other peoples children, others cried so much, their hearts ached so much. Why, then, are you going along crying when your children are not there?"

The Sangkye continued: "Will you stay in my oath or not? If I see my children, if I find them, I will stay in your oath." She replied.

Guru Pema then bound her to an oath to stay in a body of millet, with bones and teeth of shell, innards of paper, a tongue of red berry, eyes of a nut. Her clothes were to be binding string figures. Her food is now the mucus, saliva, eye drippings, body dirt, and left over food of humans. Her staying place a throne of sticks set in dirt.

Mhamho by cannibalistically consuming children acts directly counter to Tamang social values of non-accumulative reciprocity. *mhamho* is then typical of Tamang constructions of evil which I have discussed at length elsewhere (Holmberg 1989). *mhamho* as a form of generalized evil is now ritually

⁶Specialists generally list nine *mhamho*: *Achi mhamho*, *de mhamho*, *gyambal mhamho*, *shyishyi mhamho*, *nangsri mhamho*, *mhathatong mhamho*, *guitang mhamho*, *buttmari mhamho*, *kambar mhamho*. See Höfer (1981) for general ethnographic description of *mhamho* and linkages to Indic and Tibetan cosmologies.

exorcised on a regular basis from Tamang households as part of larger shamanic rites or lamaic rituals.⁷

When the origination account of *mhamho* is ritually recited, the scene set is that of a primordial opposition between a society of humans and a contorted society of demons. In the time of the origination of the world, humans lived in direct contiguity with these forces. As the origination account of *mhamho* makes clear, humans in their relation to malevolent beings become like children in their dependence and vulnerability. *mhamho* is figured as a negative mother. Rather than offering protection and nurturance to humans, she consumes them. In direct contrast to *mhamho* are *kale ama* or *phamo* mentioned at the outset, the nurturant protectors of children. The term *phamo* is often extended to include all divinities. This opposition between *mhamho* as negative mother and *mhamho* as a positive mother is one expression of a general opposition between the forces of generation figured in the divine and the forces of degeneration figured in images of malevolent beings (including demons, evil spirits, and shades of the dead). In conclusion, the cultural figuration of *mhamho*, thus, suggests that the general construction of relations of humans to the divinities and demonic agents in western Tamang culture transforms the relations between parents and children. The vulnerability of children transforms into general human vulnerability to demonic agents and the dependence of children into dependence on divinities. Finally, I would like to note in curative soundings, *bombos* playfully toss (*tengba*) divine and demonic agents about in the air as one would a child thereby inverting the relation of vulnerability and making these forces subject to human manipulation.

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⁷The exorcism of *mhamho* becomes the frame for removing pollutions in the context of the more encompassing rite of which it is a part. Thus, I will not dwell on it here but rather concentrate on how children and childhood figure in larger Tamang constructions of evil.